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KILLING GOD: THE PROPAGANDA OF HIS DARK MATERIALS

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SYNOPSIS

His Dark Materials is a fantasy trilogy for adolescents and adults and has been registering sales comparable to *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. British author Philip Pullman's spellbinding storytelling abilities and the fact that his books have taken the most prestigious literary prizes in Great Britain promise fantasy lovers a fun read.

On the other hand, Pullman's blatant anti-God and anti-Christian agenda so pervades his stories that they are unpalatable for many readers. Pullman's central thesis is that the church is a repressive hierarchy seeking to control people by disseminating propaganda about a deity who makes up rules to stifle human freedom, growth, and creativity. Pullman is especially concerned about what he sees as the church's repression of natural human sexual development and experimentation during puberty. He castigates C. S. Lewis's literature, including *The Chronicles of Narnia*, for disparaging girls and women and for being racist and full of unconscious sexual repression.

His views on the ability of story and narrative to influence people's lives and his warnings against abuses of power in religious institutions could be instructive; however, Pullman's tirades against Christianity are so vitriolic that even non-Christians often end up bemused and wearied. His antireligious propaganda pervades his trilogy as well as his interviews and is filled with half-truths and outright lies. In his trilogy, his seething hatred of God and the church ruins what could otherwise be a well-told story.

Satan, as the Angel of Light, came to Eve to warn her about the "God" who had set himself up as their creator. Yahweh, an angelic imposter, wanted to keep her and her husband in darkness and bondage by imposing his will on them and all of creation. Satan, on the other hand, was there to free them from their unconsciousness and help them experience the difference between good and evil while growing in wisdom and love. Humanity would then be freed from this tyrannical, self-centered, supposed creator and embark on a glorious mission — to form heaven on earth.

This isn't a new interpretation of the Genesis account; the Gnostics were telling it in the third century A.D. Now a British author has revived the story in his trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (named after a line in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book Two: "Unless the almighty maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds"), which is being acclaimed as a "giant" of fantasy literature.

Philip Pullman was born in 1946 in Norwich, England. His father was a Royal Air Force fighter pilot, and the Pullman family spent the early years stationed in various parts of the world. When Philip was seven, his father was killed in action while fighting the Mau Mau terrorists in Kenya, Africa.

Pullman's mother married another pilot, and the family eventually moved to Australia, where he discovered stories in the form of comic heroes and where his desire to write was formed. Later he was sent back to England to live with his grandparents and attend an English prep school in Norfolk. Because his grandfather was an Anglican clergyman, Pullman attended church on a regular basis. He lost his faith in Christianity, however, and found refuge in the world of stories.

He later studied English at Oxford University and worked as a librarian there. He also taught preadolescents at two schools in Oxford. He used storytelling and drama to draw his pupils into learning. It was the perfect environment in which to hone and practice his craft. Pullman is a master storyteller whose books have won the most prestigious literature awards in Great Britain.

Pullman has written several children's books. His Dark Materials (HDM) is a trilogy that includes *The Golden Compass* (titled *Northern Lights* in Great Britain) (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), and a companion volume, *Lyra's Oxford* (2003).

HDM is a huge success. In 2002, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* sold close to 900,000 copies. HDM was a close second at 748,099. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books took the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth positions. Prior to 2002, HDM had sold over 1.5 million copies.

THE STORY

The trilogy takes place in three different worlds, following the heroine Lyra and her "daemon" through harrowing adventures. In Lyra's world daemons are the external souls of humans, in animal form, and cannot be separated from their humans by too much distance without causing excruciating pain.

The story is riveting for science fiction and fantasy fans, with trips through gateways to other worlds, armored polar bears, descriptions of fantastic creatures, good and bad angels, evil adults hunting for children, suspense and adventure, and breathtaking descriptions of idyllic worlds.

Pullman's vitriolic anti-God and anti-Christian propaganda, however, invades his books early on, intruding with increasingly tiresome tirades against a controlling, oppressive church ruled by a manipulating, oppressive Authority who lies to his subjects and takes away all their fun. In HDM, for example, Pope John Calvin, headquartered in Geneva, largely controls the world in which Lyra lives. Pullman speaks of the church's castrating boys without anesthesia to keep their voices from changing, so churches will continue to be filled with songs sung by high-voiced boys. This castration theme recurs several times. The church is cruel in Lyra's world, and it practices inquisition-style torture to maintain compliance.

One mysterious element that figures prominently in the story is "Dust." The underlying question in the story is, What is it? Dust is the elementary particle from which all conscious life issues. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, Dust was attracted to them, and they became conscious.

Lyra's mother and father are cold-hearted and cruel. Her father's goal in the story is to stage another rebellion aimed directly at the Authority (God) to complete what Satan had failed to accomplish in her rebellion. In HDM Satan is a female named Xaphania, who has always fought against the closed-mindedness of the Authority. All her rebel angels are referred to as followers of wisdom.

In this story we learn that Yahweh, the Authority, was the first to emerge from Dust into a conscious being. As others came into consciousness, he convinced them that he had created them; so from the beginning the Authority was a liar and a manipulator. The Authority was young during Adam's and Eve's lifetimes, but by the time of Daniel he was known as the Ancient of Days because he had advanced in age. By the time *we* meet God, he is a feeble, senile being held captive in a glass coffin. Later, he finds relief when his coffin is finally broken open so he can dissolve into nothingness. We learn that the one who is really in control in the heavens is Enoch/Metatron, who meets his end when Lyra's parents sacrifice themselves in order to destroy him.

Lyra is portrayed as a wild child, abandoned by her parents as a baby, who lies to get what she needs. Her conversion comes when she and a companion from our world, Will, travel to the land of the dead.

There is no heaven or hell. All the souls that have ever lived are in a storage tank guarded by harpies (mythological beasts). Lyra convinces one of the harpies to show them the way out of the land of the dead by telling her story, and for the first time she tells the truth. She is never able to lie again. The harpies, who are hate-filled because they have been fed on Yahweh's lies, realize they are hungry for true stories. They love Lyra's story and are transformed by it. They promise to release all the dead, who will also share their stories. The dead who follow Lyra and Will out return to Dust and float away as golden sparkles into the stream of the collective consciousness to forever be part of the elemental, physical, conscious "stuff" of trees, flowers, people, planets, and stars.

As it turns out, Lyra and Will are the new Adam and Eve, whose fall will redeem the world from the oppression of the church. Mary, an ex-nun from our world, who plays the part of the temptress in this story, tells them her story. She was first devoted to the church, and then, as a young woman, fell in love and had a (implied) sexual experience that helped change her mind. Her story awakens Lyra and Will, both 13 years old, who fall in love. Their love (including their implied sexual union) saves the world where they are staying and opens the way to save the rest of the universe.

PULLMAN ON TRUTH, GOD, AND THE FALL

HDM has been compared to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and J. K. Rowling, but Pullman does not like the comparisons. In one interview he distinguished himself from those writers and their genres, stating, "I'm trying to do something different: tell a story about what it means to grow up and become an adult, the experience all of us go through. I'm telling a story about a realistic subject, but I'm using the mechanism of fantasy."¹

Pullman views stories as vehicles for truth. He believes that in them there is also "a social benefit. All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions."²

Pullman's ideas on the power of stories to teach are correct, but his disparaging remarks about moral precepts establish a false dichotomy between stories/narratives and moral precepts/instructions as vehicles for truth. Great teachers and great literature use both to teach. Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, for example, is one of His best loved and most widely remembered stories, for it teaches us profound truth about the character of God. At the same time, His instructions in the Sermon on the Mount are equally well remembered and widely used, for they teach us essentially the same truths. Consider, for instance, His instructions on prayer: "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name..." (Matt. 6:9 NKJV).

Though Pullman has contempt for Christianity, he delves deeply into the imagery of the fall of Satan and humankind. He has been compared to John Milton, the author of *Paradise Lost*, although Milton, while frustrated with the church, continued to love the Word of God and Jesus Christ (whom Pullman never mentions in his stories).

Pullman's view of the Creation story is radically different from the one portrayed in Genesis or in Milton's work. In the Genesis 3 account, the Serpent, who epitomizes evil, deceives Eve by disputing and distorting God's words to Adam and her. According to Pullman, the Serpent is the giver of light. He says, "I'm just as interested in the Creation story as the fundamentalists are...but in the part played by the tempter, who leads us to the kingdom of good and evil, which is wisdom, as an act of kindness towards those beings who had been kept as prisoners by the Authority."³

In the Genesis account, Adam's and Eve's disobedience against God led to separation from the life of God, resulting in human bondage, toil, and death. For Pullman, the Fall was a step forward, "the beginning of true human freedom — something to be celebrated, not lamented."⁴

When asked about his religious beliefs, Pullman replied, "Well, I look at the world, and I see no sign of God anywhere....So I have to consider myself an atheist. But because of my upbringing I'm a Christian atheist....I

know the Bible and the hymnbook and the prayer book very, very well, and they form a deep and inescapable part of my nature. I don't want to be free of them. I value enormously my past and my background, and the education and upbringing I had is in a very Christian household. But I find it impossible to believe."⁵ He says he values the traditions his grandparents exposed him to, but his stories tell us something quite different. He is desperately trying to escape from them and to invite as many along with him as he can.

Elsewhere he adds, "I've got no evidence whatever for believing in a God. But I know that all the things I do know are very small compared with the things that I don't know. So maybe there is a God out there. All I know is that if there is, he hasn't shown himself on earth."⁶ Contrary to Pullman's claim, there is ample evidence for the existence of God, and we are especially interested in Pullman's complete silence concerning the life and words of Jesus, who claimed to be, to paraphrase Pullman, "God showing himself on earth" (e.g., John 1:1, 14; 8:58; 10:30-33; 14:9).

The only place where he does mention Jesus is when he criticizes all organized religions. He says, "My position would be that throughout human history, the greatest moral advances have been made by religious leaders such as Jesus and the Buddha. And the greatest moral wickedness has been perpetrated by their followers. How many millions of people have been killed in the name of this religion or that one? Burnt, hanged, tortured. It's just extraordinary."⁷

Pullman is quick to condemn all those who follow Jesus as monsters who commit all kinds of crimes. The problem is that he ignores significant portions of Christian history and what the church has accomplished. For example, Christianity accorded women a new status in a society that previously treated them as property; Christian charity throughout the ages has been an identifying mark of the followers of Jesus; modern education, science, and medicine have their roots in Christian movements; the roots of democracy and abolition in America and in England are found in the church. These historical facts, among others, are overlooked in Pullman's railings.

PULLMAN AS THE ANTI-LEWIS

Pullman uses his writing as a platform to promote his anti-Christian views, which is ironic because he attacks C. S. Lewis for spreading his pro-Christian views in his children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Pullman is obviously the "anti-Lewis." In speaking of Lewis's series, he says, "I read them when I'd already grown up, and I thought they were loathsome, full of bullying and sneering, propaganda, basically, on behalf of a religion whose main creed seemed to be to despise and hate people unlike yourself. Whatever Christianity says, I don't think it says that."⁸

Speaking to an audience of children and young adults, Pullman also said of Lewis's series, "I realized that what he was up to was propaganda in the cause of the religion he believed in. It is monumentally disparaging of girls and women. It is blatantly racist. One girl was sent to hell because she was getting interested in clothes and boys."⁹ Elsewhere he added,

This seems to me on the part of Lewis to reveal very weird unconscious feelings about sexuality. Here's a child whose body is changing and who's naturally responding as everyone has ever done since the history of the world to the changes that are taking place in one's body and one's feelings. She's doing what everyone has to do in order to grow up. Maybe one day she'll grow past the invitations and the lipstick and the nylons. But my point is that it's an inevitable, important, valuable and cherishable stage that we go through. This is what I'm getting at in my story. To welcome and celebrate this passage, rather than to turn from it in fear and loathing.¹⁰

This lengthy quote from Pullman shows that he misrepresents Lewis in the same way he misrepresents history and Christianity. In book seven of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Last Battle*, for example, the problem wasn't that Susan was into growing up. The problem was that while growing up, she decided that the stories of Narnia and Aslan were just that, stories of youth that needed to be left behind. Susan, moreover, did not go to hell; she simply was not in the train accident that took her siblings and parents to heaven. Lewis does not tell us the rest of her story.

Pullman's views on Lewis's treatment of girls and women are bewilderingly bigoted, given how Lewis develops his female characters. In book two, *Prince Caspian*, for example, Lucy, the youngest, is the one who can see and hear Aslan (the lion character who represents Jesus) before anyone else can. She also leads the others to where they need to be. In fact, the "bullying and sneering" behavior Pullman refers to in Lewis's stories all comes from boys who are just acting, frankly, like boys. These boys (e.g., Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and Eustace in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*), however, experience remarkable adventures and encounters with Aslan, which change them into better boys.

Lewis's grand theme is about individuals' transformation of character through knowing and being known by Aslan. Pullman's grand theme is about individuals' transformation through puberty and by throwing off any beliefs or rules imposed by the church. Pullman is not content to stop there, however; what he wants is nothing less than the death of God, which he readily admits: "I am all for the death of God."¹¹

HOW ARE CHRISTIAN PARENTS TO RESPOND?

An even wider audience for Pullman's books will be created as his popular trilogy is made into movies (contracts are in the works). Many Christian parents will be making decisions on how to interact with their children when they come home with questions about his stories. As Christian parents ourselves, we do not believe we have to agree with every author we read with our children. By reading material with which we disagree, we can expand our minds and build appropriate responses to the ideas a writer is trying to communicate. As Christians we want to give intelligent responses that come out of love and respect for the author and that will point others to Christ rather than repel them.

At the same time, however, Pullman's stories have such a violent hatred of God and the church pulsing through them that we have to be alert to his real agenda, which is to disseminate his own virulent antireligious propaganda. One antireligious reviewer at Amazon.com, for example, who understands Pullman's agenda and uses his material for what it is intended — to indoctrinate — wrote of the trilogy: "It was an excellent introduction to destructive religious thinking. For those of us whose desire it is to raise children who trust their own divine nature and believe in their own innate goodness, His Dark Materials is a wonderful exposé of organized religion's most corrupt and virulent beliefs. By far better than two weeks of summer Bible school!"

Another Amazon.com reviewer,¹² however, challenges, "If you are able to articulate clearly to your kids why you disagree with the premises of this story, then you might have some very deep and wonderful conversations about the meaning of your beliefs and just what it means to have God in your life." Christian parents can teach their children that they need not fear the literature that the world produces. The world is naturally going to produce literature that is anti-Christian because Christ is lacking in its worldview. Children can be taught, however, to fearlessly examine and question the worldviews of others as well as their own.

This isn't just going to happen. It takes work on the part of parents. Some parents will want to examine the themes and ideas in the books, so they can interact with them and instruct their children as they become mature enough to work with the material. Others, because of the anti-Christian content of the books, will want neither to spend time on them nor to expose their children to them.

A word of caution, however: these books are not suitable for younger, preteen children. In another review, for example, one parent who caught the worldview of Pullman wrote:

The final message is NOT appropriate to children. I'm not a Christian, so I don't have a problem with Pullman's hatred of Catholicism. (Though, I do wonder if he wasn't one of those poor young alter boys who was abused by his priest years ago. That would explain his near hysteric anti-religious tone.) By the time he got around to killing God in the third volume, we were so tired of his bigotry that we all just laughed. What bothers me most about His Dark Materials is that Pullman tells us that in addition to God, Good and Evil are also dead. To prove

this he turns his villains from the first volume [Lyra's parents] (both of whom are child abusers and murderers) into semi-heroes by the third volume. And then in a final (totally unexplained) triumph he saves the universe by having two thirteen-year-olds have sex! This man has serious problems. He has my sympathy. But, that doesn't mean we should expose children to his sick musings. [Please note: Nothing in Pullman's books is explicitly sexual.]

Pullman is so anti-religion and anti-God that even atheists have trouble with his work. One such reviewer wrote, "Now I am actually an atheist but Pullman's anti-religious tub-thumping irritated even me. It is as reductionist and dogmatic as the most hateful religious creed. The work itself cannot fulfill the standards that it seems to be demanding of others."

A HOLLOW GOSPEL

Pullman is a postmodern prophet. His postmodern message has several main points, which includes denying the existence of God, objective truth, and the validity of metanarratives (overall narratives or worldviews, such as those from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, thought to be true by large numbers of people). In postmodern thought there are no metanarratives, only local narratives or perspectives held by individuals and small groups, and these narratives are all equally valid and true.

The problem with postmodernism is that it is a self-refuting worldview. Pullman, for example, states, "I'm against any form of fanaticism, fundamentalism or zealotry, and this certainty of 'We have the truth.' The truth is far too large and complex. Nobody has the truth."¹³ As with many postmodern writers, Pullman wants us to believe that his own assertions about the nature of reality are true, which contradicts his own assertion that "nobody has the truth."

In a similar manner, while denying the validity of metanarratives, Pullman creates his own metanarrative, mixing Gnosticism, atheism, animism, materialism, Greek mythology, and other literary influences in his novels, as well as interacting with other disciplines such as physics and psychology. Pullman contends that "we all need some sort of myth...some sort of over-arching narrative to live by. For hundreds of years in the West, this need was fulfilled by the Christian story, but that is now either dead or dying."¹⁴

Pullman realizes that eliminating the Kingdom of Heaven creates a void. "When it was possible to have a belief about God and heaven," he says, "it represented something we all desired. It had a profound meaning in human life...But when it no longer became possible to believe, a lot of people felt despair. What was the meaning of life? It seems that our nature is so formed that we need a feeling of connectedness with the universe."¹⁵ Pullman's answer to this dilemma is the Republic of Heaven, where God and the church are eradicated. The Republic is introduced in the HDM trilogy when Lyra contemplates her responsibility to make it grow in her world. Not surprisingly, Pullman has assigned himself this task in our world.

Pullman's belief that the Christian story (worldview) is "either dead or dying" is another example of his disregard for what is happening in the real world, among real people. Any missions conference will prove that the Christian Gospel is alive by showing that the number of conversions is growing at a faster rate than at any other time in history.¹⁶

The gospel Pullman offers as an alternative is no gospel at all. He tells us in HDM that we need to reject the promise of an afterlife. In the gospel according to Pullman, we are stuck in this physical world as physical beings and there is nothing else. It then becomes our responsibility to do the best we can with what we have. The Republic of Heaven is built on tolerance and hard work. Science, art, and spirituality (whatever that means in a purely physical world) develop with us in the here and now, and we need to use them to better the world in which we live. Pullman can make it sound good — humanity working for love, learning, connectedness, and consciousness — yet his gospel ultimately offers only a sort of quiet, sad resignation to a life where we find a few friends, do our duty here on earth, and hope for nothing else.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the dismal, disappointing ending to his trilogy. His two young heroes, Will and Lyra, who have gone to the abode of the dead and come back together, love each other deeply and want only to live and die with each other. They are told, however, that their only recourse is to live separately in their own worlds until they die and then their atoms can find each other and “hang out” together forever in plants, stars, and people. This news tears their hearts out, and their anguish fills several pages. Faced with the hopelessness of being left alone with only their memories of each other, they force a cheerful smile onto their faces and walk away into their own worlds to spend time with a few friends and do their duty of building the Republic of Heaven.

This, of course, is reminiscent of Greek tragedy and Stoicism. Pullman is correct about the human need to feel connected, and yet his hollow answer connects us to nothing more than an impersonal Fate that often leaves us bereft, separating us permanently from those whom we love best. How different is the Christian Gospel, which tells of a personal, loving God who has provided a way for a present and eternal relationship with Him and with others whom we love! What humans need is not a connection with an impersonal universe. What they need is to love and to be loved by other persons. Nowhere is this need fully met except in Jesus Christ who, literally, lived and died for us, has bodily gone to the abode of the dead and come back for us, and lives in and through us so that we (in our bodies) can live with Him and with those we love forever.

NOTES

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